

## EXAMPLE EXPLICATION

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AP English Literature and Composition

4-20-12

Explication of “anyone lived in a pretty how town” by e. e. cummings

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**Comment:** Include your name, our class name, the date, and “Explication of + your poem’s title and author.”

**A note to my students:** I thought I “knew” this poem when I was heading into this explication, but through the explication process, I uncovered layers of meaning and new interpretations I had not previously considered. I share this with you in hopes that you will approach this process with an open mind and with a confidence that your interpretation will be valid because it is yours. Use the language that we have been using in class and that you have encountered in our readings as a vehicle to reach analysis. You can do this. We are always learning. It does not stop – even when you’re old like me. ☺ Speaking of my explication – mine is long. Don’t let that intimidate you. Yours should be thorough, but as long as you reach the goal of exploring the items outlined in the Explication Guidelines, length should not be a major concern. Each explication will be different in many ways, including length. Please see the following article for insight on how some teachers view students’ obsession with assignment length and seeking the “perfect” paper: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/author/rbarreca>. I will say that I was a student, who often demanded to know length and felt frustrated when a teacher would not give me a clear-cut page-range, AND I do not share *ALL* of the sentiments of the writer, BUT I do assure you that I find assignments of varying lengths valuable and that I am not hiding a magic number from you! (I actually quite admire those who are able to convey their thoughts in a concise manner because I have not been blessed with the gift of brevity.)

As always, if you have questions, please ask.

Jodie Morgenson 4/23/12 10:58 AM

**Comment:** You do NOT need to include a note like this. I just included this because I wanted you to consider this information prior to reading my explication, which could seem overwhelming without this explanation.

anyone lived in a pretty how town by e. e. cummings

anyone lived in a pretty how town

(with up so floating many bells down)

spring summer autumn winter

he sang his didn't he danced his did

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Women and men(both little and small)  
cared for anyone not at all  
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same  
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew  
autumn winter spring summer)  
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf  
she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
bird by snow and stir by still  
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones  
laughed their cryings and did their dance  
(sleep wake hope and then)they  
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon  
(and only the snow can begin to explain  
how children are apt to forget to remember  
with up so floating many bells down)

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one day anyone died i guess  
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)  
busy folk buried them side by side  
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep  
and more by more they dream their sleep  
noone and anyone earth by april  
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)  
summer autumn winter spring  
reaped their sowing and went their came  
sun moon stars rain

retrieved from <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15403>

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**Comment:** Include the actual poem and its source information.

I found my copy of the poem, “anyone lived in a pretty how town” by e. e. cummings, on the poets.org website. The subject of this poem is *life and relationships* and *how different types of people approach them*. There are two prevailing themes in this poem, and they are paradoxical in nature – seeming to simultaneously cancel one another out while revealing one another’s truth. One theme could read like this: *Love can exist despite adversity*. A second equally true, but seemingly contradictory theme could read like this: *No one loves anyone because humans are inherently self-absorbed*.

This poem could be described as experimental, avant-garde, or free verse, but cummings has employed a structure (one that mimics a more traditionally structured poem) but it is a structure that follows Cummings’ own rules. It is organized in nine quatrains, seemingly divided into three equal sections (set 1: quatrains 1 – 3; set 2:

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quatrains 4 - 6 ; quatrains 7 – 9). Another notable structural feature is Cummings' pairing of independent clauses in single lines without traditional punctuation, (specifically, lines 4, 7, 14, 19-20) which lends itself to conveying a sense of urgency in the poem—as if the speaker feels compelled to share the story as quickly as possible. The use of enjambment also carries this same feeling of a story, which cannot be contained by its teller. Lines 22 through 24 are one example of said enjambment. These lines' enjambment matched with another mention of the reoccurring image of bells, gives the poem a rhythm that suggests the idea of time marching on.

Line 1 could be interpreted in a couple of ways, one being *how pretty a town!* another being *how can anyone live in a pretty town?* Both interpretations are valid and feed into the aforementioned paradoxical themes. The line that begins (with up so floating ...) suggests that the story that is about to unfold might be true. The bells mentioned in this line are significant as well, as their presence is repeated throughout – most often associated with the character, *anyone*. They seem to herald important events. The main character of this poem (*anyone*) is introduced as someone who, despite the expected order of life (spring summer autumn winter) stood out from the crowd, by living a passionate life in which he celebrated both his successes (as he “danced his did”) and his failures (as he “sang his didn't”).

In stanza 2, society (represented by the townsfolk of this *pretty how town*) is united against the individual (*anyone*). They were content with (even protective of) their unchanging routine and they did what they could to maintain the status quo. I get the impression that they do not even want to think about *anyone's* individuality, let alone witness it firsthand, so they do what they can to “blow out his candle” so to speak (as they *sowed their isn't* and *reaped their same*). These little small (minded?) people trudge on through life (symbolized by the succession of the seasons – as represented by the *sun, moon, stars, and rain*) in the labors of their drudgery.

In stanzas 3 and 4, the children (who traditionally are more open-minded than the adult-set) of this *pretty how town* are introduced. This group of children was observant or intuitive enough to realize that our protagonist and *noone* were in love, but as they grow up (progressed cyclically through the seasons) they lost their ability to see or notice this passion. I want to draw attention to the phrase “more by more” which is reminiscent of the more common phrase “little by little”. Cummings seems to enjoy using common phrases, but adding an unexpected element to it. (In this case, he used the familiar structure, substituting words that mean quite the opposite of what is typically seen in such a structure.) In these stanzas, *anyone* finds love despite the group's rejection of him. In fact, *noone's* love for *anyone* continually grows under these circumstances. According to Stanza 4, *anyone* meant

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**Comment:** FORM and STRUCTURE

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**Comment:** The next FIVE paragraphs paraphrase (with some analysis) each of the poem's stanzas and some of the specific lines. If I was analyzing a shorter poem, I would probably approach this section as a line-by-line paraphrasing, but since this poem is longish, I took it stanza by stanza and sometimes even lumped more than one stanza together.

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everything to *noone*.

In stanzas 5 and 6 attention returns to the automatons of the pretty how town (*someones and everyones*) continue their routine-driven, unthinking lives, even coupling – not out of passion or love – but because it fulfills expectation. The previously introduced children grow into dull, predictable adults, just as protective of their tedious, frigid unbending lives, as their parents before them. The snow mentioned in line 22 suggests this frigidity. The bells introduced in stanza 1 reappear, as a signal, tolling the passage of time.

In stanzas 7 and 8, *anyone* dies and *noone* does too, and, as in life, they were an annoyance to the others in their town who have the job of burying the lovers' bodies. Also, as in life, *anyone* and *noone* were united and live eternally together. In stanza 9, an onomatopoeic version of the bells (dong and ding) make their final appearance and another message emerges: *Life goes on*. It is up to the individual to eke out a significant life –or not, but even when someone does swim against society's current, *life goes on*. Sadly, it seems, *everyone* and *someone* learned nothing from *anyone and someone's* plight.

Cummings employs several sound techniques in this poem. He uses several types of rhyme – internal, end, and slant rhyme. The internal rhyme in the opening two lines give the poem a playful feel – much like that of a nursery rhyme. The first two lines of most of the stanzas typically rhyme, but, ever the rule breaker, Cummings bursts our expectations by avoiding rhyme in the third and fourth lines of most of the stanzas. Just when the eye and the ear believes they have cracked the poem's rhyme scheme code, he occasionally sneaks in a slant rhyme as well, such as in lines 7 and 8 with *same* and *rain*, providing the ear with an unexpected hint of rhyme in a place one expects to NOT find any (based on the previous stanza's pattern). His use of alliteration continues the sing-songy appeal. In line 4, *didn't*, *danced*, and *did* provide the ear with a pop of alliteration, and once again in line 15, with *snow*, *stir*, and *still*, and in line 20 with *their*, *they*, and *their*.

One of the most striking uses of figurative language is Cummings' use of characters as symbols of society at large. *anyone* could literally be anyone (which ironically, makes him a figurative symbol). *noone*, *someones*, and *everyones* are equally symbolic characters. They represent the generic people who make up our world. Another significant use of figurative language is the repetitive use of the seasons and their corresponding sky-based imagery to represent the cycle of life. In literature, spring traditionally represents birth, summer--youth, autumn—adulthood, and winter—old age or death. Cummings presents the progression of seasons to show how life slogs on, and that no matter what people do, time forges ahead. He switches up the ordering of the seasons throughout, to demonstrate the

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Comment: SOUND

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cyclical nature of life as well – people are born, children grow up and die, and all along, new babies are born, while others pass away. |

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Comment: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

| One of the conspicuous traits of Cummings' work (as a whole—not just in this poem) is his manipulation of syntax. He loved to play with words and his ordering of words throughout this poem demonstrates that quite clearly. However, I will focus on a few of the most salient examples of this poetic feature. The opening line immediately catches off guard those accustomed to the use of Standard English grammar. The word "anyone" is generally used as an indefinite pronoun to indicate one or more people when exactly which person(s) are unknown or when it is unimportant who fulfills the particular role that someone can/will fulfill. So the poem opens with anyone (who one soon discovers is a character, rather than an unknown person/people) living (past tense) in a *pretty how town*. This last grouping of words is puzzling. When breaking down this phrase into individual words the reader is left with "pretty" (an adjective, usually meaning attractive or charmingly appealing or as an adverb to indicate a degree to which something is), "how" (typically an adverb used to ask or report by which means something is happening), and "town" (a noun meaning a densely populated area with buildings, larger than a village, but smaller than a city). This arrangement of words is atypical in that "how" is not an adverb that is normally modified. To the ear, it seems that these words are out of order, but, in the context of Cummings' work, one realizes that they are simply being used in an innovative way. Also, in stanza 1, the use of *didn't* and *did* are out of the ordinary because Cummings uses them as nouns, when their conventional use is that of verbs. In stanza two, the people are described as sowing *isn'ts* and reaping *sames*. *Isn't* is normally used as a verb, while *same* is usually used as an adjective, and *sowing* is customarily something people do to seed, and *reaping* is by and large something people do to the resulting crops. So, he juxtaposes these words thereby inviting the reader to decode a whole new meaning. These are just a few examples of Cummings' acrobatic manipulation of syntax, but they are telling examples. |

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Comment: SYNTAX

| Now back to theme. *Love can exist despite adversity* AND *no one loves anyone because humans are inherently self-absorbed*. Of the two messages, I prefer the former—as I view this poem as a tale of *love against the odds* (an *US* against *THEM*), but I can see truth and universality in both messages. The first message can be extracted from stanza 1 in which *anyone* emerges as an individual in that he celebrates his successes and failures – an atypical behavior for a town full of people, who thrive on the mundane and begrudge anyone (the literal anyone AND our protagonist, *anyone*) who strays from the prevailing attitude. This theme builds to stanza three when *noone* is introduced as *anyone's* admirer and beloved. Stanzas 3 and 4 further builds on this idea as it describes how

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noone's love continually grows. I've included part of stanza 3 and all of stanza four with my own line-by-line interpretation (in parenthesis).

[... noone love him more by more  
(Her love grew by leaps and bounds.)

when by now and tree by leaf  
(She loved him every place, every time; she loved the big things and the little things too.)

she laughed his joy she cried his grief  
(She stood by him in good times and in bad – which should be noted as a very traditional marital duty – one that is often included in marital vows.)

bird by snow and stir by still  
(Through spring and winter, during exciting time and quiet times, she stood by him.)

anyone's any was all to her ...  
(Everything that was important to *anyone* became important to *noone* because he meant everything to her.)

It could be argued that the theme of *no one loves anyone because humans are inherently self-absorbed* is also developed throughout this poem. If you look at Cummings' choice of character name, it is easy to see support for this theory. Not only do the people of the town care for *anyone* "not at all" (line 6), one stanza later, we learn that "no one love him" either. By the time the reader reaches the poem's end, the townsfolk are still reaping what they've sowed, and even though anyone (any person) and no one (any insignificant being) are dead, everyone (who are also significant to everyone but themselves) carry on with their dreary toils. One can descry a sense of pointlessness to life in this message and in the poem itself.

How might two seemingly contradictory themes be contained in a single piece of literature? Easy – life itself is contradictory and despite life's pointlessness (sowing isn'ts, reaping sames) despite people's self-absorption (children forgetting the passionate side of life as they grow into boring adults and marrying their everyones because they are *supposed to* rather than because they are compelled, by love or passion to do so), individuals CAN find fulfillment and occasionally beat the odds. In this case, *anyone* and *noone* represent individuals who found happiness DESPITE society's narcissistic tendencies.

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**Comment:** EXPLORATION of ONE THEME.

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**Comment:** I included exact TEXT as well as my interpretation.

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**Comment:** EXPLORATION of ANOTHER THEME. (You will probably only look at ONE.)

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**Comment:** EXPLORATION of HOW two CONTRADICTIONARY THEMES can exist simultaneously. (This is another paragraph that I added because I wanted to. You may not have a paragraph like this. You have to GO where your explication process takes you. This was a product of my explication process and I included it because I was interested in exploring it.

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As overwhelming as this poem seems after a cursory read, I find it to be quite successful in conveying a multi-faceted and conflicting message. The sound techniques, figurative language and sentence structure all lend themselves to building the theme. The obvious strengths of this poem, to me, are Cummings' ability to break the rules of grammar in a way that adds to the strength of the poem's message. His unexpected reclassification of the parts of speech and word order build a dynamic story, which is more effectively conveyed through this unique means as it forces the reader to examine each sentence, each phrase, and each word individually and puzzle over their relationship to one another, in addition to their singular meanings, which sometimes can be interpreted in multiple ways—adding yet another dimension to the poem's meaning. The poem's strength could also be—ironically—its weakness because the same traits that lend themselves to build an impressively complex tale and message can also be what “turns off” potential readers, but for those who are tenacious, the payoff is astonishing. ]

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**Comment:** EVALUATION

After multiple readings and much pondering, I found this poem quite valuable and an amazing example of the craft of poetry in its manipulation of language and multi-layered meaning. After reading it, and committing some time to its analysis, I feel accomplished! Overall, this poem is a fine example of how breaking the rules can lead to good things – though it should be noted that in order to break the rules, one must know them well! e. e. Cummings' poem is an unsullied example of what a creative mind can produce and though one interpretation of the poem's theme gives one a sense of futility, the theme I believe shines through is a message of hope and encouragement to those who deviate from the norm and live a life of vim and fervor. ]

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**Comment:** I combined my PERSONAL RESPONSE with the CONCLUSION.